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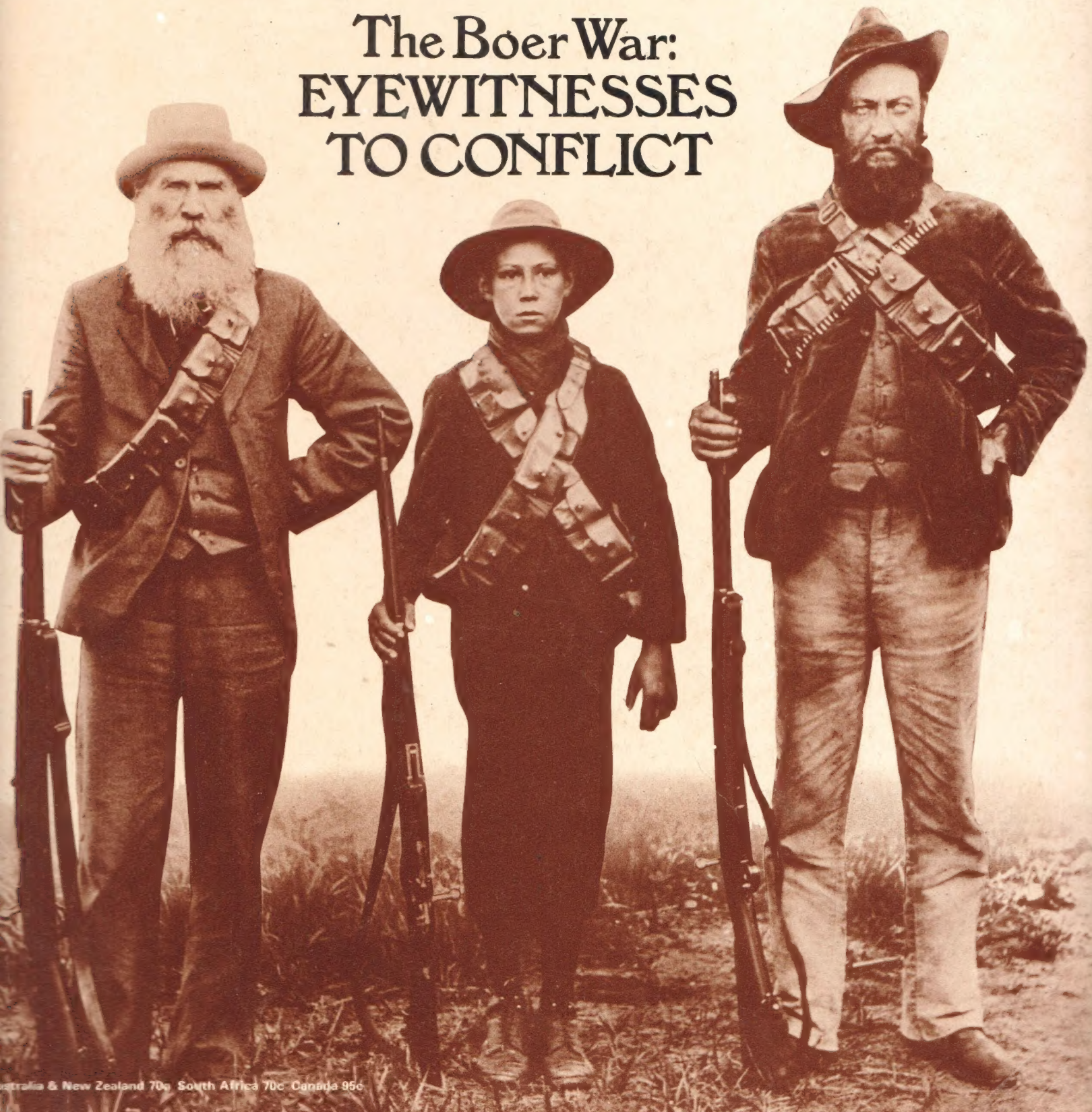
The Boer War: EYEWITNESSES TO CONFLICT



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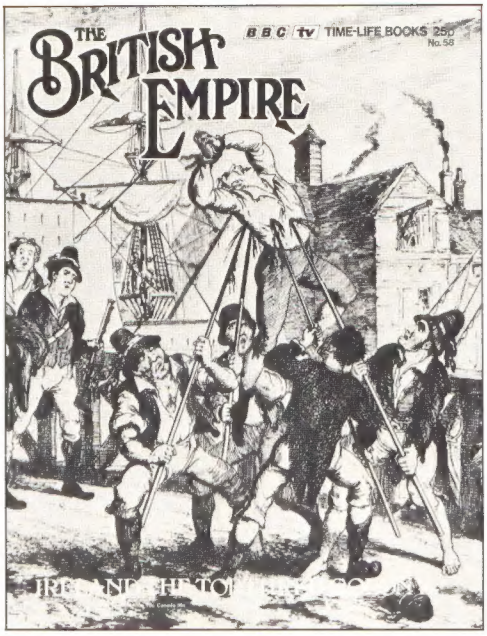
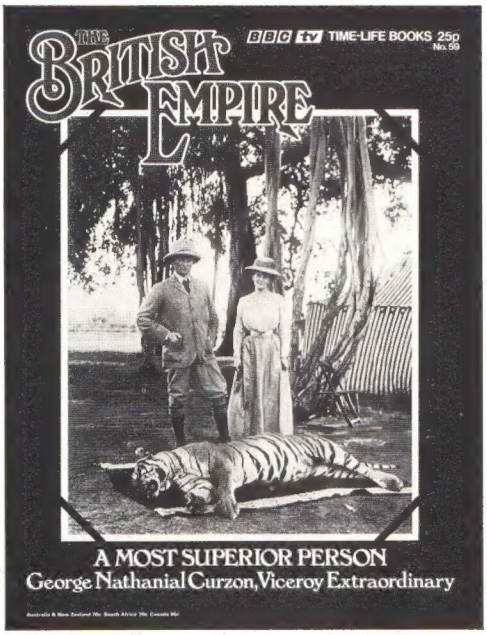




CONTENTS

1569. The Boer War: Eyewitnesses to Conflict
Eyewitness accounts from both Boer and British sides reveal some of the buffooneries and tragedies of the war's campaigning phase.

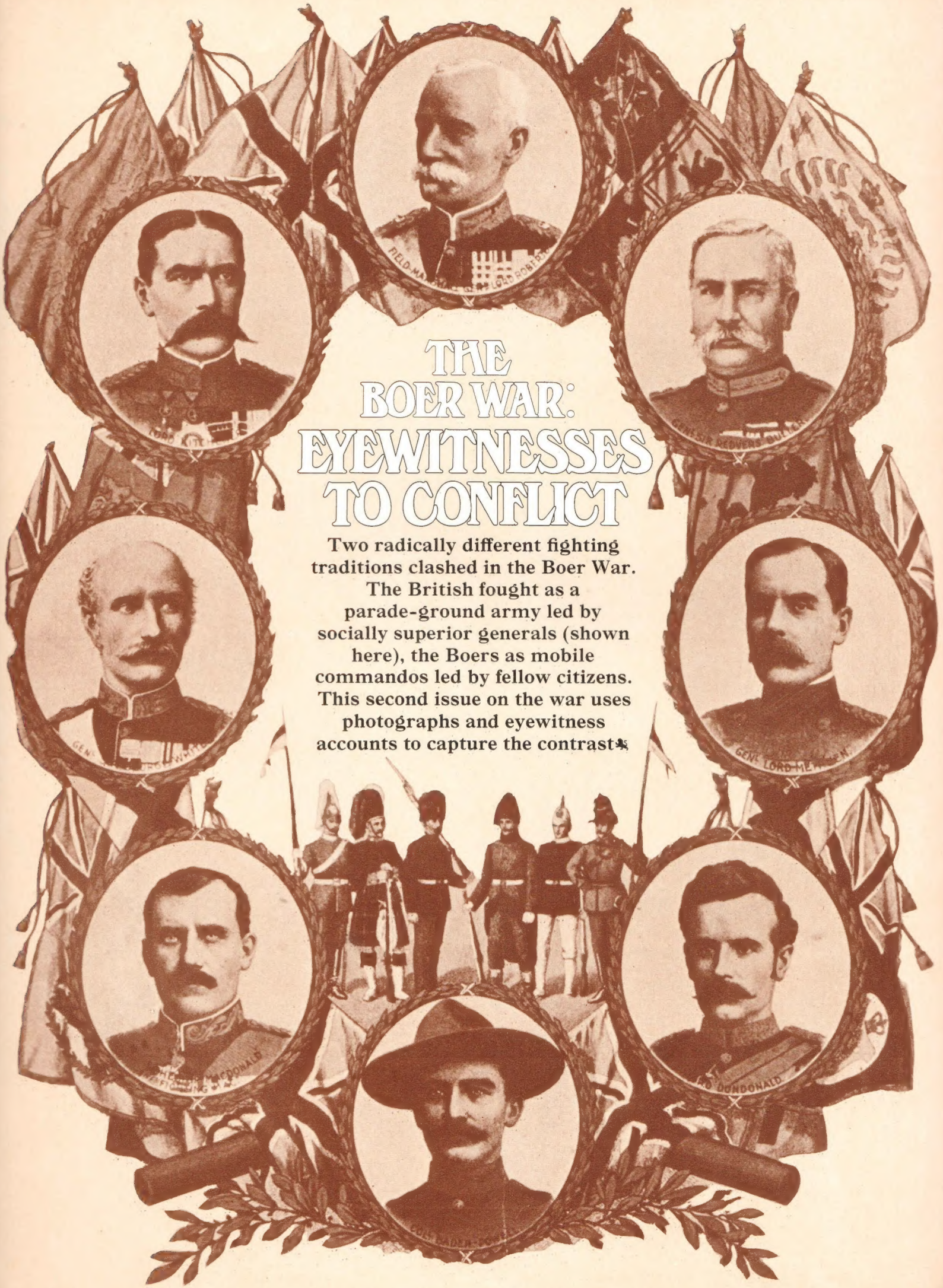
1574. Picture Essay: An Army's Might, A Nation's Will
A photograph album of the war as it was experienced by ordinary men of both nations, conjuring up the whiff of cordite, the sour aroma of blanco and the creak of leather saddles.

1588. A Nation Crushed
The passion and bitterness of the guerrilla war, and the scorched-earth tactics required to humble a proud and stubborn nation.

1590. Picture Essay: The Coming of the Concentration Camp
Inside views of an unpleasant 20th-Century institution originated by the British.

1594. Picture Essay: Peace at Last
The emotional end to a war that had been both militarily and morally exhausting.

Cover: Three generations of Boer freedom fighters, ragged, undrilled but tough, symbolize the solid rock of nationalism on which British hopes of quick victory foundered.



THE BOER WAR: EYEWITNESSES TO CONFLICT

Two radically different fighting traditions clashed in the Boer War. The British fought as a parade-ground army led by socially superior generals (shown here), the Boers as mobile commandos led by fellow citizens. This second issue on the war uses photographs and eyewitness accounts to capture the contrast.

Millions of words have been expended by historians eager to assess, describe, analyse, praise or condemn the Boer War; few of them capture the feel of the war as known to those who experienced it at first hand. The following contemporary accounts are taken from a variety of sources: the diary of a Russian teenager newly arrived in the Transvaal; the reminiscences of a Boer farmer's son; the letters of an aristocratic British mounted infantry officer; the accounts of a middle-aged surgeon in a British camp; the memories of a British corporal who was just 21 when he fought in the battle of Spion Kop. Together, they typify the multitude of personal experiences that formed the attitudes of hundreds of thousands of ordinary people on both sides.

Freda Schlosberg, the 13-year-old daughter of a wealthy Russian émigré, was at Loreto Convent, the only English girls' boarding-school in Pretoria, when she witnessed the Boer mobilization two weeks before war broke out. She wrote in her diary: "27 September, 1899, Pretoria. When I awoke from my reveries I saw several horsemen with rifles galloping along the street and I guessed that something alarming has happened. . . .

"In the afternoon some of us are allowed to go into town with Sister Ursula. The streets are crowded. Boers on horseback, equipped with rifles, bandoliers, etc., are converging towards Government Buildings to hear General Joubert, the Commandant-General, make a long and eloquent speech. Afterwards the men proceed to the railway station. By four o'clock 4,000 Boers have left Pretoria for the Natal border. There is an immense crowd at the station and the trains steam off amidst patriotic songs and shouts of encouragement."

Victor Pohl, the son of an Orange Free State farmer, was only 13 when war began, and he later drew on his memories and the reminiscences of friends to evoke a variety of war-time scenes, among them this portrait of a Boer commando preparing for action in October, 1899:

"Soon there were gathered a large number of farmer-soldiers, hefty, clear-eyed, bronzed, and good-natured men from the open veld. . . . Sitting their horses like cowboys, they wore what they had stood in when they were called up, and their rifles and bandoliers were slung carelessly on their persons according to individual inclination. A raincoat or blanket, or both, were rolled tightly and fastened to the pommel or tail of each saddle, and in most cases saddle-bags stuffed to bursting with boer-rusks, bread, and biltong [dried meat], completed their outfits. To an outsider this motley and unwarlike gathering would have appeared to be without leaders or discipline, for the Boer leaders did not differ in appearance from the rest of the slouching burghers. And yet when they addressed the men they were listened to with earnest attention, although not with parade-ground rigidity. What these men lacked in military discipline was largely made up for by their independence of thought and action, and their sense of responsibility. Moreover many of the men were deeply religious, and all these qualities, combined with their profound faith in their cause, their reliance on themselves and their Mausers, and the knowledge that they were fighting for their homes and country, made of this undisciplined crowd a formidable army, one to whose prowess the civilized world was to pay tribute."

Meanwhile the British were gathering their own forces. Troops were already under way from Southampton to the Cape, among them the 30-year-old Gilbert Sackville-West, Earl de la Warr. During the seven months he was to spend in South Africa before he was invalided home, he wrote a series of letters describing his war-time experiences:

"Cape Town, October 31st. We anchored in the bay at 9.45 last night, and several officers came on board. We were shocked beyond measure to hear of the losses we had suffered among our officers and men. For three hours we listened to the accounts of the engagements in Natal, which came upon us as a surprise. I expect to start for Ladysmith immediately; probably my next letter will be from there. The strictest censorship is exercised over all news from the front, and even people here have the utmost difficulty in getting news."

Among those in the siege of Ladysmith was a 52-year-old surgeon James Kay,

continued on p. 1572

The Citizen Generals who led the Boer nation

To the British, whose military leaders came from the apex of society, the rough-looking Boer generals were almost indistinguishable from the mass of ragged farmers they led. In fact, there were two very different types of Boer general a generation apart in character and ability.

When the war began, the Boer generals were old men. The lawyer Piet Joubert, commanding the Transvaal forces, was 68. Careful and unaggressive, he was determined to avoid casualties – even at the expense of dramatic victories. While younger commanders urged him to strike at the vulnerable port of Durban before British reinforcements could be landed, Joubert was content to lay leisurely siege to Ladysmith.

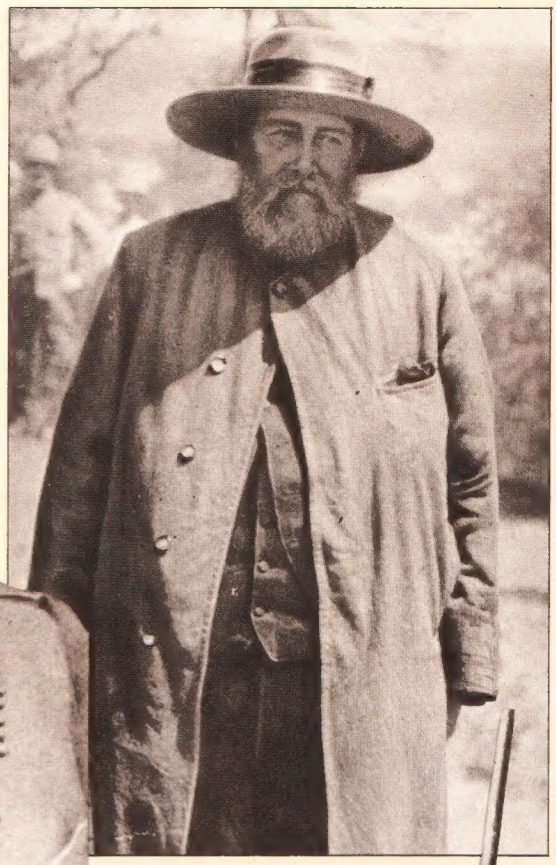
"He was a kindly, well-meaning old man," noted one frustrated young Boer fighter, "who had done useful service – but he gave the impression of being bewildered at the heavy responsibility now resting upon him."

The old man's death in 1900 added to the gloom cast only a few weeks earlier by General Piet Cronje's surrender at Paardeberg. Honest Piet, as he was known, shared Joubert's distaste for decisive action and had preferred to tie down his forces in besieging the militarily worthless British garrison of Mafeking. On February 27, 1900, Cronje was forced to surrender with 4,000 men.

Cronje's surrender and Joubert's death hit the Boers hard, but these events did finally clear the way for younger and more audacious commanders. The military balance had already shifted decisively against the Boers, but their new generals – Louis Botha, Koos de la Rey, Christiaan de Wet – devoted their slender resources to a protracted guerrilla campaign against the British.

Old Joubert's successor, Louis Botha, a 38-year-old farmer, was the youngest – and most important – of the new commanders. Happiest playing the accordion to his family and friends, Botha personified the Boers' unorthodox approach to warfare. He used no maps and propounded no theories, but the British were sufficiently dismayed by his military operations to offer him an annuity of £10,000 if he would give up. Unlike de la Rey and de Wet, who did not hesitate to impose discipline with their riding crops, Botha relied upon personal magnetism to rally his men: "Never mind," he would tell his hard-pressed followers. "Let's keep up our courage and do our duty." It was a spirit that was to survive the bitterness of defeat.

A grim-faced but still stoical General Cronje faces the camera (right) after his surrender to Lord Roberts.



Louis Botha rejected the semi-ecclesiastical garb favoured by his colleagues for military tunic and riding breeches.

Kindly old General Joubert (below) looked more at home behind his lawyer's desk than astride a horse leading the Boers into battle.

Despite Koos de la Rey's physical resemblance to a warrior prophet out of the Old Testament, there was nothing biblical in his use of barbed wire and trench warfare.

The seemingly benign General de Wet (right) proved to be the most implacable and elusive of Britain's foes.

who in November, 1899, was allowed by the Boers to establish a military hospital at Itombi, three and a half miles outside the town. Hospital and town were linked by a railway, along which ran one train a day carrying wounded and supplies. He wrote to his wife:

"1 December. The Camp grows in size daily and the privation, misery, work, bad news and despondency increase, but not the provisions. Few of us are in good health; hunger, anxiety, and depression having left their mark on all. The anxiety is on account of the sick and wounded, the depression is due to the number of deaths, the daily funerals, the suffering of the sick and the series of reverses our troops have had; never as to the ultimate issue. The sick and wounded set all a bright example, teach us how to suffer without complaint and die with resignation; bright, cheerful and hopeful to the last, some almost ending life with a joke."

The realities of the war struck young Earl de la Warr forcefully:

"Modder River, South Africa, December 25th. The battles in this campaign do not consist of a few hours' fighting, then a grand charge, resulting in the rout of the enemy, when men can see the effect of their work. No; this is very different. Think of it, a two-mile march under the fire of an invisible foe, then perhaps eight or ten hours' crouching behind any available cover – an ant hill or a scrubby bush – when the slightest movement on a man's part at once enables the hidden enemy to put him out of action, whereas he never has a chance of retaliating. Certainly this is fighting in circumstances which require extraordinarily good nerve and courage. And when the day is over 'Tommy' has not even the satisfaction of knowing what he has accomplished. When the day comes which will give him an opportunity of getting at close quarters with the Boer, he will remember the long and weary hours he has spent facing the enemy's trenches."

The worst British defeat of the war was at Spion Kop, a hill seized by the British during the night of January 23, 1900, and then bloodily retaken by the Boers. The account of one man's feelings during the initial British assault comes from Corporal F. P. Crozier, who survived the ensuing massacre unscathed:

"The dark climb up the almost trackless hill . . . the sudden fusilade – the mist – the fog of war – uncertainty and partial ignorance.

"How did one think? What did one think of? Or did one think at all?

"Protection? Did that come first . . . undoubtedly! But of what kind? From the enemy or oneself? Which? Was it both? 'I mustn't think,' I muse as I flatten my heels and pray for the ground to open and let me in. 'I must place myself where I can use my rifle,' comes back the echo. 'What's wrong with me? . . . Is this real? Own up, lad! You're terrified . . . that is what is the matter!' What is the secret of all this? Why do men stay here [when] they could slip off? . . . The conservation of self-respect – when that is lost, in battle, all is lost – when that remains anything may be accomplished. That was, is, and always will be the secret of the British soldier, but, to the young recruit . . . it seems like chaos and feels like fear."

The spirit of the Boers as they retook Spion Kop is exemplified by the following anecdote retailed by Victor Pohl:

"There was a red-bearded fellow named Buys, who was entirely devoid of fear. When the battle was raging fiercely he would climb on to the trench wall and presenting his buttocks to the enemy would invite them to do their worst; and when, as sometimes happened, a bullet covered him with dust or whined past his ears, he would make faces and jeer at what he called 'the rottenest shots in creation.' Then he would empty the magazine of his own rifle at the enemy before snatching someone else's with which to fire. This fooling went on for six days and during that time he never got as much as a scatch, until it seemed as if he bore a charm against British shells and bullets. On the morning of the sixth day came the unexpected news that the English had succeeded in climbing Spion Kop, although it was extremely steep, and the going very tough. Volunteers were immediately called for to retake the position. Buys, however, in spite of all warnings, made straight for the top of Spion Kop and although he had to negotiate exposed stretches before reaching the point on which the rest were so laboriously advancing, yet his guardian angel was still in attendance and he again escaped unscathed.

"Our men, shielding behind the edge of the rocky rim, were eventually not more than twenty yards from the British who held the flat table-like top. At that time the British still employed the wasteful and largely ineffectual method of firing in volleys instead of individually, and this enabled Buys to exploit still further his fantastic buffooneries in the face of the enemy. He would wait until a volley had been fired and would then stand up and empty his magazine at point blank range before taking cover and reloading. This process was repeated successfully several times and then, having reloaded once more, he addressed himself as he usually did before rising: 'Now then, Buys! Steady, old man – not a single miss this time.' But he had hardly risen to his full height when a volley that had been kept in reserve for his special benefit rent the air, ending his career."

Earl de la Warr voiced his increasing dismay at the course of the war in January, 1900:

"We have not seen an English paper for over a month; we have seen no accounts of the Battle of Colenso and other battles; but it is to be hoped that true and unvarnished accounts are being published; versions which will impress on the British public the critical position of affairs in South Africa, and the necessity of dispatching every available man to reinforce our troops in the field. It is no use mincing matters; the failure of this advance is a most severe blow. . . .

"A false notion of loyalty and patriotism exists in connection with this campaign. Men are branded with the taint of disloyalty if they express the opinion that matters are assuming a critical aspect, unless they describe a defeat as a victory. . . . Surely it is more patriotic to warn the British public, and to place them to avert an irretrievable disaster."

Dr. Kay, writing from the Itombi hospital camp, had similar complaints:

"1 February, 1900: Men are dying here from actual starvation. One gets one's patients over dysentery and typhoid and then sees the poor fellows sink slowly, because there is no food for them. It is awful to know that our soldiers are treated like this, and it is all through mis-

Well-to-do British townspeople and their dog perch in unconcealed boredom and discomfort on their crude dug-out in Kimberley, besieged for four long months by the Boers.

management – in fact there is no management at all. . . . Buller has had ten weeks to move eighteen miles and he has really done nothing except lose precious lives, messing up everything he has tried, encouraging the Boers, and dispiriting our own soldiers. . . .

"The bread is quite uneatable. For some time we have had bread rolls made with mealie meal and atta, an Indian grain. This mixture results in a product as hard as stone and with no nutrition. It often produces violent pains and diarrhoea. The only way to eat it is to boil it for hours in soup and even then it is generally thrown away. I wonder whether an ostrich could be fed on it with impunity."

During the war, there were countless incidents that justified the description of the conflict as "The last of the gentlemen's wars." This is one, witnessed by Victor Pohl, who, at the time, was at his farm-house home with his mother:

"One morning when a thick mist which had enveloped the flats cleared away we were astonished to see horses and men in scattered and confused groups standing all over the veld. Shortly afterwards a British officer with about twenty men approached the house, and when they were about twenty yards from it he halted them, and advancing to the door, greeted my mother. She was at once struck by his voice, which was gentle and cultured and in no way reminiscent of the parade ground.

"'I hope you don't mind our calling on you at such an early hour,' he said, 'but we lost our way in the dark and mist and most of us are nearly perished with cold. Would it be possible to give some of the worst sufferers a cup of hot coffee or tea? I will, of course, pay for it.' He was in such obvious distress, and shivering so violently, that my mother at once asked him to come inside and while she prepared a big pot of coffee for his men, she poured out a cup of our breakfast tea for him and gave him some hot scones and butter. I doubt whether a man ever enjoyed a meal more than that officer enjoyed his tea and scones. . . .

"'Madam,' he said at last, 'it seems a miracle that on this of all mornings we should chance on the home of an English family. . . .

"'I must disillusion you,' said my mother. 'You are speaking not to an English lady, but to a Boer woman.'

"'Surely you are jesting,' he replied, surprised and incredulous. . . . 'Well, this is the first time I have had the opportunity of entering the home of a Boer family, if that is really what you are. But I shall never forget your kindness.'"

The British occupation of Pretoria brought to an end the all-out military phase of the war. The Boer fighters were, apparently, beaten, and this mood, before small Boer bands initiated guerrilla warfare, was captured by the young Freda Schlosberg:

"Many Boers had fled from Johannesburg and Pretoria prior to the British occupation of those towns on 31 May and 5 June. They were in a wretched state, many of them not having tasted food for almost three days.

"Many of the Boers asked, 'Where is our Government? What has become of the President? Where have all the officials gone?'

"No one could answer these questions. . . . Their country has been overrun by the vast numbers of their foe. Their strongly fortified capital has been taken. Their President has gone away. They have fallen . . . to fathomless depths from which they feel they may never rise, and are reduced to a state of humbleness"

AN ARMY'S MIGHT, A NATION'S WILL

The British Tommy sailed to South Africa in October, 1899, convinced that he would be home again by Christmas. After all, how could a bunch of wild and undisciplined farmers hope to stand up against the finest parade-ground army in the world? But he was soon to find that a nation supreme in the use of horse and gun had to be matched with more than precision drill and a facility for waiting on table in the officers' mess. Determined to preserve their hard-won independence, every Boer male able to bear arms was to become Tommy's often unseen, always elusive and frequently deadly enemy.

The British soldier of 1899 was little more than a mindless brick in a wall of flesh (left) while every Boer from 16 to 60 was fighting for his homeland, an attitude exemplified by the three generations above.

The army corps of 50,000 men that began arriving at the Cape ports early in November, 1899, was the largest and best-equipped force that had ever left Britain. But it was to be increased almost ten-fold before victory could be claimed.

Rallying to the Flags

On September 27, 1899, President Kruger ordered Boer mobilization. Soon the vast and empty spaces of the Transvaal began to yield up groups of horsemen. None wore uniform, but each carried a rifle, a bandolier and a saddle-bag full of biltong, the dried meat that constituted traditional Boer fighting rations.

The horsemen rode in "commandos," the basic Boer fighting units, each one composed of every able-bodied man of a particular town or district and led by elected officers. During the final days of September, dozens of commandos converged upon Johannesburg and Pretoria to receive extra supplies and final battle orders from their commanders.

Britain's mobilization was a rather less simple process. Out of political and financial faint-heartedness the British government delayed the dispatch of a major expeditionary force to South Africa until just four days before the actual outbreak of hostilities on October 12. By the time the first contingent arrived at Cape Town on October 31, the Boers were already on the offensive. Speedy deployment was now the overriding necessity, but this was hampered by what an irate Lord Kitchener called "old red-tape heads of departments" who were constantly quoting inapplicable Army regulations "generally dated about 1870 and intended for Aldershot manœuvres."

British troops prepare for kit inspection at Cape Town. Kitchener approved of their stoical discipline but berated their total dependence on officers and lack of resourcefulness.

A group of Boers entrain for the front. What they and their countrymen lacked in military spruceness, they made up for in determination. President Kruger spoke for all of them when he warned that "if they must belong to England, a price will have to be paid which will stagger humanity."

Home-made waistcoats like this one designed to carry bullets for the Mauser rifle were favoured by many of the front-line Boer fighters.

The smartness and courage of the British Guardsman were both legendary. But even these qualities were not enough against a determined enemy who knew the tough terrain.

A bandolier of ammunition worn round the ankle was another unorthodox but useful item of equipment in the Boer arsenal.

The Maxim machine-gun had often been used by the British with devastating effect against reckless ranks of natives, but it was almost useless against elusive Boers.

Kitted Out for Action

The British soldier, weighed down with field-pack and conventional army accoutrements, presented a tempting target for his lightly equipped adversaries. One British observer watching a mounted patrol ride past found every man and horse "decked out like a Christmas tree. The new military saddle is cumbersome, unneccessarily heavy and has no advantage whatsoever over an ordinary panel saddle and is at least double the weight. Why any man should carry more than his rifle and ammunition into battle, a haversack and a blanket, is what all would like to know."

But rifle and ammunition would hardly have been adequate. The German-made, clip-loader, Mauser rifle used by the Boers was greatly superior to the British Lee-Metford, whose magazine had to be loaded round by round. Only the British bayonet brought real terror to the Boers, who disliked close-quarter fighting and did their best to avoid it.

This group of Coldstream Guards includes white-bearded Colonel A.S.Codrington (seated, centre), who once, when shot in the left ankle, merely informed his helpers: "Outer low left."

Boers outside besieged Ladysmith present a typically relaxed picture. "Except for the night picket, and an occasional fatigue party," recalled one later, "there were no military duties."

The Boer soldier's military effectiveness was measured not by the gleam on his buttons or the shine on his boots but by his skill with a rifle and his agility on a horse.

War on Wheels

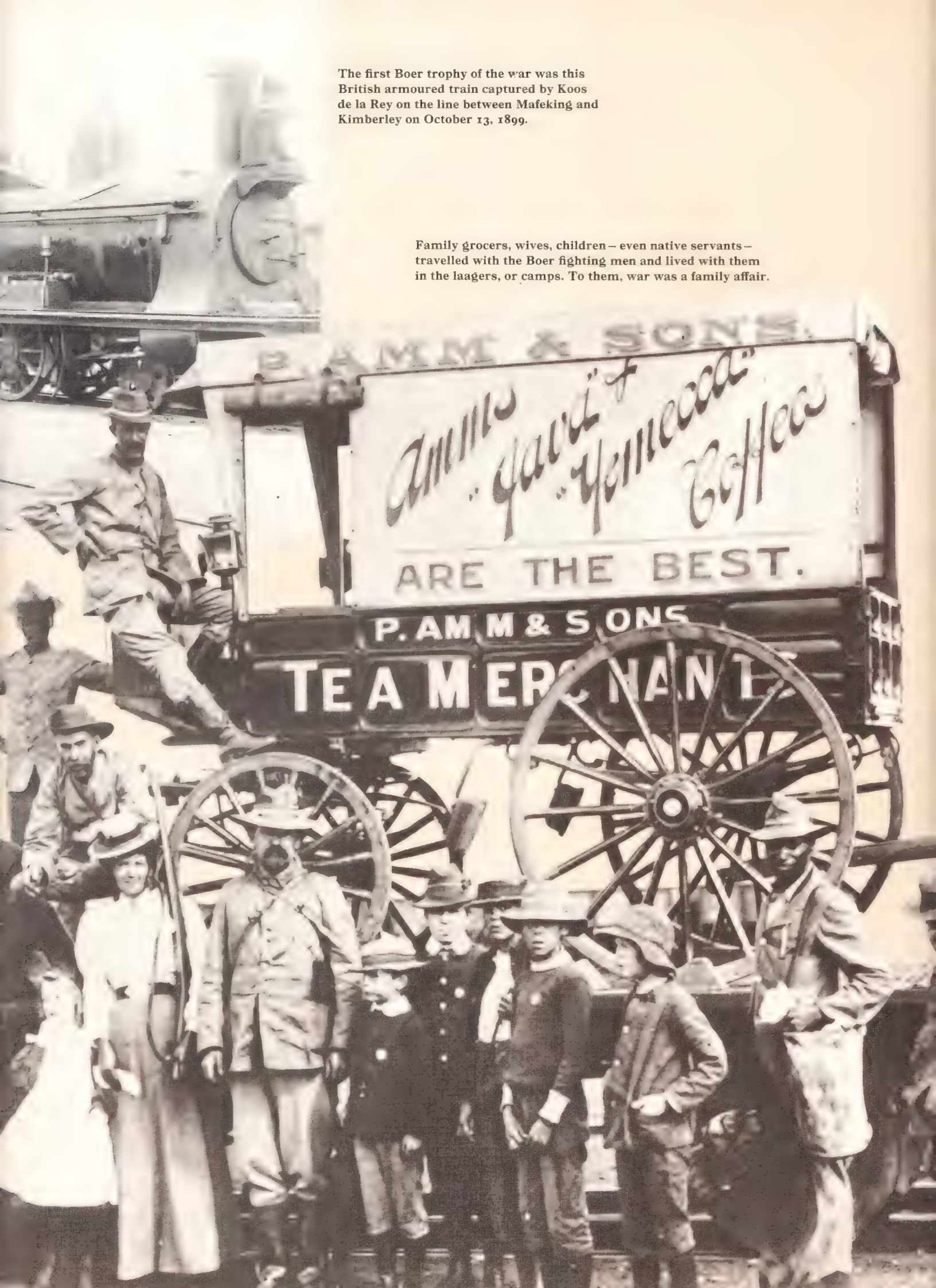
The initial strategy of both sides in the war was dictated by railways, for without them the movement of men and supplies was dependent on the slow and vulnerable ox-wagon or mule cart. Four main lines, all originating at South Africa's few ports, were the prizes for which Boers and British struggled during the first year of the war.

For the Boer republics, almost totally surrounded by British territory, the rail link between Pretoria and the Portuguese East African port of Delagoa Bay was a vital lifeline to the outside world. By September, 1900, however, this, together with the rest of the railway network, had fallen to the British and Lord Roberts confidently informed the British government that the war was virtually over. It was an assessment the Boers were rapidly to disprove. Despite defeat in the field and the occupation of their capital, the Boers were to continue their resistance.

British troops clamber aboard an armoured train in Natal in November, 1899. A few days later, it was ambushed by Boers who took 70 prisoners, including a young London war correspondent – Mr. Winston Churchill.

The first Boer trophy of the war was this British armoured train captured by Koos de la Rey on the line between Mafeking and Kimberley on October 13, 1899.

Family grocers, wives, children – even native servants – travelled with the Boer fighting men and lived with them in the laagers, or camps. To them, war was a family affair.



A lone Boer outrider.

The War in the Saddle

The guerrilla campaign to which the Boers resorted in the autumn of 1900 found the British as unprepared as they had been in the opening phase of the war. Mounted troops were essential, yet both horses and men to sit them were in desperately short supply. Appealing to Britain and the Empire for 30,000 mounted troops, Kitchener set about making the best use of what was immediately available. Fresh volunteers were recruited in South Africa while the Commander-in-Chief – often in person – scoured the country for malingerers.

By May, 1901, Kitchener had managed to assemble some 80,000 mounted troops under his command, of whom nearly half were from Britain's overseas Empire. But the new troops were only half trained and rarely matched up to the Boer horsemen. It took vast quantities of British to make up for this difference.

A forlorn column of the Leicestershire Regiment retreats to the safety of Ladysmith after the British defeat at Dundee.

Whether driving supply wagons (left) or on horseback the Boers were always ready to make a quick withdrawal. Kitchener grumbled fatuously that they would not "stand up to a fair fight."

Technology of Killing

In numbers and variety the British artillery was vastly superior to that of the Boers. The British possessed at least a thousand 15-pounder field-guns as well as many much heavier cannon. The Boers had no more than 70 field-pieces in all, the most powerful of which were four 94-pounder Creusot fortress guns, known as "Long Toms." But the Boers showed great ingenuity in manœuvring even these monsters. When one of them began bombarding Ladysmith, Colonial Secretary Joe Chamberlain wrote bitterly to a colleague: "Do you remember Lansdowne [the Secretary for War] telling us . . . that modern guns required elaborate platforms and mountings which took a year to consolidate? The Boers apparently find no difficulty in working their 'Long Toms' without these elaborate precautions. On the whole I am terribly afraid that our War Office is as inefficient as usual."

The Boers made telling use of their German Mausers. Sighted up to 2,200 yards and firing a smokeless powder, they were more accurate and harder to locate than British Lee-Metfords.

British artillery was in good supply, but shells were often aimed at trenches that the Boers had already prudently vacated.

A group of Boers stand proudly to attention beside their captured British field-gun.

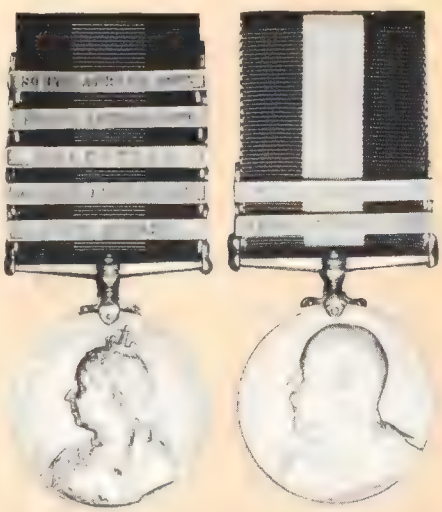
British dead on Spion Kop clog one of the shallow trenches that did little to ward off Boer fire. The pathetic lines of 700 huddled corpses moved many Boers to tears.

A rider abandons his horse, one of many ridden to death because of the shortage of fresh horses. In besieged towns horseflesh provided a welcome addition to meagre diets.

Slaughter at Spion Kop

Of all Britain's reverses in the Boer War, the bloodiest and most spectacular occurred in January, 1900, on Spion Kop. General Redvers Buller ordered the hill to be seized during one of his abortive advances on Ladysmith. As a result, 2,000 men found themselves pinned down on the hill's exposed western summit by heavy crossfire between British and Boer artillery.

General Botha, commanding the Boers, reported that his shells "told with terrible effect upon the unfortunate massed Tommies on the narrow ledge of the hill. The English guns, on the contrary, were responsible for a large number of casualties on their side; shell after shell missing the mark and falling among the men who were bravely fighting against us."



Queen Victoria's Boer War medal (left) carried battle honours since most of the campaigning occurred before her death in January, 1901. Edward VII's accession coincided with the start of the guerilla war: the new medals bore date clasps only.

II. A Nation Crushed

In mid-1900, after the fall of Pretoria to the British, the Boers turned to guerrilla warfare. In retaliation, the British introduced a "scorched-earth" policy to cow the populace and deprive the guerrillas of their bases. Freda Schlosberg saw the effects of both Boer and British tactics:

"7 September: Bronkhorstspruit [a town where the Schlosbergs farmed, 30 miles east of Pretoria] and the line as far as Witbank are in the hands of the British and the trains are running once more. Last week the Boers fired at a train and several British soldiers were wounded.

"One young soldier was taken off the train at Bronkhorstspruit groaning like a wild beast, shouting and appealing for help, and his comrades became wild with rage. 'Is this fair?' they cried. 'We have offered the Boers peace; they can't win, and are deliberately shooting people needlessly.' 'This is murder,' one shouted. 'Let us kill them,' another shouted. 'Let us burn their houses where they hide,' was a general chorus.

"The officers were equally indignant. They ordered 400 cavalrymen to get ready and within an hour they were on their way to destroy the houses of the Boers within ten miles of the railway line. Soon nearly all the houses were destroyed, including the furniture and everything in them. If a house was occupied they gave the owners no more than a few minutes to leave, with nothing more than their blankets, pillows and whatever food they could carry, and thus women and children were reduced to poverty and misery, and had to walk for days before they could find shelter.

"The cavalry came to the house of old Hans Botha, who fought and received seven bullets in the War of Independence in 1881. He was absent but they found Mrs. Botha and two little grandchildren. They gave them three pillows and three blankets and told them to leave at once, and then they burned her house and all its contents. She watched them from afar and in a short time she saw her home, where she had spent all her life, razed to the ground. . . . Oh, what terrible sufferings did this dreadful war cause and God knows when it will end."

As part of their anti-guerrilla tactics, the British also established concentration camps to hold thousands of homeless civilians. Conditions in these camps were frightful, and when the effects of this new policy were known in Britain, there was a storm of protest that led to reforms. Many British on the spot, however, believed there was no alternative to the extreme methods adopted if the war was to be ended in Britain's favour. One of them was Dr. Kay, who in February, 1901, wrote the following vitriolic defence of British policy:

"A great outcry has been raised about the burning of Boer farmhouses. . . . The justification of the burning is that it destroys the guerrilla's base of supplies, his source of information and his resting place. Many Boers leave their commandos and return to their homes for a short period of leave. Here they gather all available information about the British, what places can be raided for supplies, and taking food with them, they return to their commandos with a rested horse and make use of the information they have obtained.

"There has also been some agitation about concentration camps raised by a few unsexed hysterical women who are

A London news-vendor shouts word of Lord Roberts's march on Pretoria. Roberts entered the Transvaal capital on June 5, 1900, and watched the Union Jack made by his wife run up on Government Buildings.

prepared to sacrifice everything for notoriety.

"The whole question of the camps is bound up with that of guerrilla warfare. If it is lawful and necessary to destroy such Boer houses and farms that are used as bases for warfare, is it not more humane to establish camps where women and children can be housed? And even at those Boer farms which have not been destroyed, the exigencies of war have brought a desperate shortage of food and medical attention and a constant danger from marauding natives against unarmed women and children. Is it not better for them to be taken to camps than be left where they are? All the misery, the burning and the camps are the result of war; it has always happened, and will happen again. After all it was the Boer Government which declared war.

"It is true that there has been sickness in the camps and that conditions have been primitive. But they were set up hurriedly by the military authorities, and there is always disorganisation and lack of careful planning where large numbers of people are moved. Improvements are taking place rapidly, and they would have taken place whether or not there was this agitation by sexless busybodies with nothing better to do than decry everything and everybody."

In a way, Dr. Kay was proved right: brutal treatment of the Boers did bring an end to the war. Victor Pohl describes the cease-fire in June, 1902, through the eyes of one group of guerrillas:

"At last the heroic but unsuccessful resistance of the Boers was coming to an end. But even now the chief reason for their eventual surrender was the suffering and privations of the women and children. Apart from this the overwhelming majority of the men in the field were prepared to continue the unequal struggle, although they were almost all half-starved, and so ragged that some were forced to use blankets for clothes.

"The morning after peace had been declared van der Merwe was in a party of seven scouts, and as they were topping a rantjie [a low ridge] they saw a dozen British cavalrymen a mile away advancing in their direction. . . . One of the cavalrymen unfolded a white flag and advanced at a trot.

"After a good deal of discussion the conviction and sincerity of the British spokesman at last persuaded them that the war had really ceased and they accompanied them to their camp. The courtesy and hospitality with which they were received took them entirely by surprise, and for the first time for many a long day they had a real meal and a long smoke.

"The news was so overwhelming and at the same time so incredible, that most of them simply refused to believe anything unless they could hear it from General de Wet himself. . . .

"At the appointed place they found General de Wet with about five hundred burghers, encamped about a hundred yards from Colonel Elliot's forces. General de Wet was obviously in a state of great nervous tension and gloomy preoccupation. At 11 o'clock that morning the burghers all gathered round him in the veld where he addressed them, giving them first a brief outline of what had happened at the peace conference. In no uncertain terms he said that he was in favour of continuing the struggle, but that the majority of the delegates had come to the conclusion that they had reached the end of their powers. . . .

"A gaunt-looking Boer beside van der Merwe shouted, 'No, General. We will never surrender! For God's sake lead and we will follow!' And from all sides there arose a chorus of voices calling on de Wet to continue the fight. While the tumult was still at its height de Wet removed his hat, and slightly bowed his head, and immediately a death-like silence followed. Then in a voice shaken with emotion he said, 'Lay down your arms and let us enter the dark waters together.'

"For the first time those who had known de Wet for so long saw a look of despair on his face. He tried to speak again but his voice broke completely while tears flowed down his cheeks, and turning away he walked with bowed head to a near-by antheap where for a long time he sat motionless, resting his head in his cupped hands.

"A deep and solemn stillness settled over all, broken only by an occasional half-suppressed sob. Then the man who had exhorted de Wet to continue the fight came forward to surrender his rifle" ❧

Royal Engineers repair a railway line destroyed by the Boers at Kroonstad. The railway network presented a prime target for saboteurs during the guerrilla war.

THE COMING OF THE CONCENTRATION CAMP

In 1900, a grisly new phrase, "concentration camp," entered everyday speech. The camps, of huts (like those below) or tents surrounded by barbed wire, were set up by the British to "concentrate" the Boer population in one place and thus undermine support for the Boer guerrillas who kept alive the spirit of defiance when organized military resistance ended. This policy opened one of the worst chapters in British imperial history. Though not intentionally inhuman, the camps, which grouped civilians irrespective of their actual involvement in war, proved so disease-ridden and the British so indifferent to the conditions that between January 1900 and February 1902 one in five of the camps' inmates died, – 28,000 in all, 22,000 of them children. It is a fact that is still remembered with bitterness by present-day Afrikaaners.

Death by Indifference

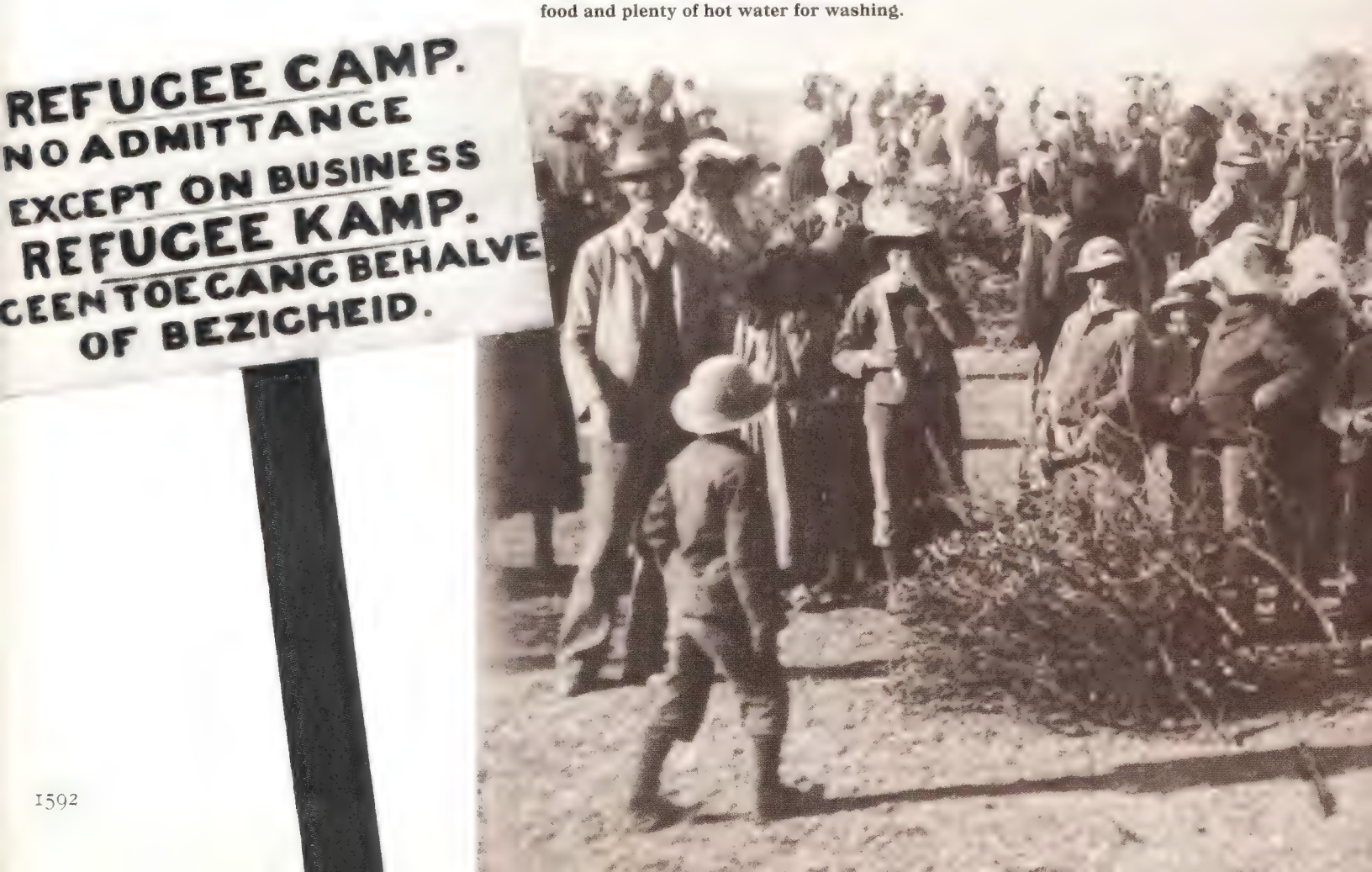
Though the camps were originally set up to protect the "hands-uppers" – Boers who were ready to surrender – and families from the farms burned by the British, their numbers were soon swelled by the "bitter-enders," those Boers caught in military sweeps across the country.

Conditions worsened as the 46 camps became overcrowded. Boers with little knowledge of hygiene were supervised by "the so-called Medical Staff who looked on, puffing their cigarettes." Disease became endemic, particularly among children. By October, 1901, the death-rate had risen to an appalling annual average of 344 per thousand.

Then the British public found out what was happening, chiefly through the zeal of Emily Hobhouse, women's secretary of the South Africa Conciliation Committee – "that bloody woman," as Kitchener called her. Drastic improvements were made. By February, 1902, when the war ended, the annual death-rate had fallen to 69 per thousand.

This official picture of healthy Boer children in camp was used to refute allegations of starvation and neglect. Unfortunately, in many of the camps the allegations were only too true.

Inmates of one camp wander about in bored dejection. Unlike many of the camps, however, this one did at least have adequate supplies of firewood, which meant warm food and plenty of hot water for washing.



Boer prisoners stand around in small groups inside the barbed-wire perimeter of a camp just outside Pretoria. The original caption to this photograph read smugly – "The Tables Turned," for the camp was built by the Boers to house an expected haul of captured British officers.

PEACE AT LAST

Peace came on May 31, 1902, when the Treaty of Vereeniging, named after the small border town where peace discussions took place, was signed by Kitchener and top Boer generals. It was met with relief by the starving Boers, and with euphoria by happy crowds in London. "We are good friends now," Kitchener told the Boer generals confidently. He was over-optimistic. Boer nationalism was by no means dead. The Boers had lost the war; but they did not intend to lose the peace.

Briton and Boer shake hands on a plate produced to celebrate the peace.

A settler raises the Union Jack outside her home while a native looks on. Under the peace, the question of native franchise, an explosive issue among the white-supremacist Boers, was carefully left in abeyance.

British troops attend a Peace Thanksgiving in Pretoria a week after the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging. Guests jam the Grand Hotel veranda to get a better view.

Jubilant crowds jam Ludgate Circus, London n celebration of the 1902 Peace Treaty etween Briton and Boer. The war that had lemanded Britain's largest overseas military ommitment to date was over at last. he Empire was once again united.

Gunner, Royal Horse Artillery, 1849